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### Doing student projects in conceptual and historical issues

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## **Doing Student Projects in Conceptual and Historical Issues (CHIP): the potential of discourse analysis**

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One of the problems of teaching CHIP is how to supervise projects in the area. Since Psychology students cannot be expected to have backgrounds in either history or philosophy, and since psychological projects are generally expected to be empirical, how can students carry out a meaningful project in this area? This article offers one solution to the problem, by showing how Discourse Analysis (DA) can be used as a method not only to analyze historical texts (cf. Lamont, 2007), but also to explore conceptual issues in an empirical manner.

### **Formulating a research question**

The first step is to find an appropriate research question. This is simply a matter of taking a significant historical or conceptual issue within Psychology, and then translating it into a question that can be answered by analyzing discourse. To take a basic example, perhaps the first conceptual issue that Psychology students encounter is the seemingly straightforward question: what is Psychology? This is typically asked at the beginning of an introductory textbook, and then promptly answered with a textbook definition. After that, students seem to spend little time considering the matter. However, there are all manner of conceptual issues that surround any definition of Psychology, whether concerning its self-defined scientific status or else its stated object of study, not to mention the implications of defining Psychology in a particular way. From a CHIP perspective, we might wish students to consider this question more carefully, and to problematize this textbook definition.

This is something that can be done as a project, which explores the question from a different perspective, one that allows for empirical enquiry. Since this

question, 'What is psychology?' is one that Psychology textbooks answer, we can re-frame the question as one that might be answered by DA: 'What is Psychology (according to Psychology textbooks)?' or, more specifically, 'How do Psychology textbooks define Psychology?'. Since the textbook definition is invariably the start of the first section of the Psychology textbook, which is usually entitled something like 'What is Psychology?' and which provides what amounts to an extended definition of the discipline, there is an obvious dataset available. Indeed, any conceptual issue that can be translated into a research question that is answerable by DA is a potential project, providing there is appropriate data available.

## **Data collection**

My own preference is to use published texts as data. There are obvious differences between published texts and other kinds of data used for DA. Unlike research-generated data, such as interview data, published texts are produced by people in the real world, for reasons unconnected to the research. Published texts, then, are forms of naturally occurring discourse. They are not, of course, naturally occurring talk, since they are already published in written form. As a result, we are limited by the details of the text itself. For example, in terms of the analysis, we cannot examine turn-taking, since published texts are invariably monologues. Indeed, even published debates, such as Hansard, lack the necessary detail. On the other hand, there are clear advantages of working with such data. After all, they provide access to an astonishing variety of real world discourse, none of which needs to be transcribed. This means that relatively short term projects, as well as longer ones, are possible. Furthermore, we can examine the rhetorical features of any text. Even if there is no evidence of interaction within the text, there is always a potential audience for any text. That, after all, is why texts are written and published, as part of a wider ongoing social interaction. In terms of analysis, this context of publication may be relevant, and will be discussed below.

Meanwhile, in terms of data collection, appropriate discourse needs to be found. This is most easily done by identifying people, objects or events that are relevant to the research question, and relevant publications in which these are discussed. In the case of the example given above, data was collected from the opening sections of the many introductory Psychology textbooks that are currently available. Several of these were in the offices of course organizers, who regularly receive copies of new textbooks and new editions of existing ones, and changes in course textbooks over the years meant that there were others sitting unwanted on shelves. Additional material was available from online sample chapters and, for a small fee, from charity bookshops.

## **Analysis**

There are, of course, several kinds of discourse analysis. The form I prefer is designed to be as straightforward as possible, and similar to early DA in Psychology (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and more recent analyses of written texts (e.g. Macmillan & Edwards, 1999; Wallwork & Dixon, 2004). The procedures of DA are described in standard methodology textbooks (e.g. Willig, 2001, 87–104), and typically involve several close readings of the texts in the light of a specific research question, coding of relevant themes, and analysis of rhetorical function. For an example of this kind of analysis, see Lamont (2007), which was written primarily as an example of how DA could be used to analyze historical texts. Since then, Bunn (2012) has also provided a guide to using Foucauldian DA for a similar purpose.

In the case of the above example, the reading, coding and analysis focused on how Psychology textbooks define the discipline. For the purposes of preliminary analysis, the research question was translated into more specific questions to help direct the analysis of the data, such as: how are objects (e.g. Psychology, other) and subjects (e.g. Psychologists, others) described?; what distinguishes Psychology/Psychologists from other objects/subjects?; what is Psychology like, and not like?; how are these comparisons made? The preliminary analysis sought

to identify common themes across the dataset. One of these, which we shall consider in a moment, was the frequent distinction between Psychology and commonsense. For example, one textbook included the following statements:

Sometimes, the results of scientific studies are denounced as 'common sense' (Martin, Carlson & Buskist, 2009, 4)

[P]sychological research frequently contradicts common-sense views (Martin et al, 2009, 5)

The next step of the analysis considered the function of such descriptions. For example, distinctions between Psychology and commonsense were invariably a means of constructing psychological knowledge as not only different from, but also superior to, lay understandings of psychological matters. Here is an example of a relevant extract, which contains the descriptions above:

Sometimes, the results of scientific studies are denounced as 'common sense': that they are so obvious as to be not worth the bother of setting up the experiment. The view, however, is generally ill-informed because, as you will discover throughout this book, psychological research frequently contradicts common-sense views. (Martin et al, 2009, 4-5).

In this extract, science is juxtaposed with 'common sense'. Indeed, it is presented as not only different from, but also superior to, common sense (since the former can be 'denounced' as the latter). In distinguishing between the two kinds of knowledge, science is described as involving the 'bother of setting up [an] experiment', while common sense is equated with being 'obvious'. This, of course, is a particular way of describing both science and common sense. In choosing these particular descriptions, scientific results are constructed as not obvious (this view is 'generally ill-informed'). The inference here is that by taking the bother to set up an experiment, we can get past what seems obvious to more reliable knowledge. This claim is, in turn, supported by 'psychological research', which is also juxtaposed with common sense, as something that

‘frequently contradicts common sense views’. Thus, the distinction between psychological research and common sense allows psychology to be constructed, like ‘scientific studies’, as superior (non-obvious) knowledge.

This, of course, is only one way of analyzing such data. There are different forms of discourse analysis, which approach texts in different ways. It may be worth briefly considering one significant difference between them – the problem of external context - since it has practical implications for how such analyses might proceed. Discursive psychologists who favour Conversation Analysis (CA) tend to regard it as inappropriate to consider information from the external context (i.e. outside of the data being analyzed) during the process of analysis. Since such analysis is focused on the concerns of the participants, not of the analyst, then unless participants can be seen to orient to a particular matter, it is seen as an imposition of the analyst’s agenda. Critical and Foucauldian Discourse Analysts, on the other hand, tend to view the external context as an essential feature of any analysis, since discourse is seen to reflect wider social processes, and so, in the process of analyzing the data, external matters may be considered that are not made explicit in the text (Wooffitt, 2005). This difference of approach is bound up with the aims and assumptions of these quite different methods, but it also points to a wider matter within psychological methods, that of subjectivity. In short, the former kind of analysis is more directly based on the data, while the latter approach allows for greater subjectivity.

While my own view is that any method can be used to make a convincing argument, but that no method does this by itself, my preference has been to stress the empirical nature of DA: in short, that claims must be based on data that can be seen. All methods involve subjectivity, of course, but it is essential that students learn at what point, and in what ways, particular claims rest upon evidence. In this way, it can be made clear that qualitative research is not merely subjective, but rather that it is open about the nature of its subjectivity and, at the same time, about its empirical basis. How, then, does this relate to the problem of external context?

On the one hand, all texts are produced within a particular context, written by and for particular people at a particular time. The form of any text is naturally bound up with the wider aims and concerns of author and audience. In the case of Psychology textbooks, for example, these are very particular kinds of texts, not only the content but also the form of which reflect the relationship of Psychology to other sciences (e.g. Smyth, 2001). On the other hand, once we consider the wider context in which a text appears, there are endless ways in which we might interpret a particular extract. Thus (and this is merely my own view in relation to student projects), while consideration of the context is an appropriate topic for the introduction and discussion sections, the analysis itself should focus on answering the research question, based on what is on the page.

For example, in the extract above, which is in the context of the beginning of an introductory textbook, the reader is addressed directly with a promise of later evidential support ('as you will discover throughout this book'). This appeal to future evidence warrants the claim that psychological research contradicts commonsense, which directly answers the question about how psychology is defined. On the other hand, if we were to consider the text as a consumer product, rather than as an argument for the worth of psychology, then the presence of 'as you will discover throughout this book', appearing in the opening pages, might be seen as a sales pitch to the potential buyer. When the external context is considered in the process of analysis, then, it is easy to lose focus. It is not that the rhetoric of advertising is an uninteresting topic; it is simply not the topic of this project. This is why the research question is important as a guide to the analysis: in this case, the analysis is concerned with how the discipline is defined, and should be focused on answering that question, whatever else is going on, based on what is on the page.

## **Structure and Presentation**

When presenting a final analysis, I suggest students follow the format of the above-mentioned article (Lamont, 2007), by providing three brief extracts as

exemplars of a particular theme, and then analyzing these in a way that ensures that each analytical point is supported by each of the three extracts, according to the following structure:

Extract 1

Extract 2

Extract 3

Analysis

In these extracts, description x can be seen: example of x from extract 1; example of x from extract 2; example of x from extract 3. Description y can also be seen: example of y from extract 1; example of y from extract 2; example of y from extract 3. The function of these descriptions is z: example of z from extract 1; example of z from extract 2; example of z from extract 3.

Unlike the analysis of the single extract above, this helps to direct the student to think about precisely what is common in the data. In practice, of course, there is more flexibility, and the final projects do not always reflect such a structure. However, by using such a structure as a guide, at least in the early stages, the extent to which the analysis is rooted in the data is made clear to both the student and supervisor. Here is an example of the structure being used in relation to the textbook distinctions between Psychology and common sense:

Extract 1

Sometimes, the results of scientific studies are denounced as 'common sense': that they are so obvious as to be not worth the bother of setting up the experiment. The view, however, is generally ill-informed because, as you will discover throughout this book, psychological research frequently contradicts common-sense views. (Martin, 2009, 4-5)

Extract 2



‘Every psychology teacher has to fight against the widespread view that psychology is mainly just common sense. First we should recognize that common sense has never been a very good guide to scientific truth (Raygor, 2005, 2).

### Extract 3

‘Many people regard themselves as expert “people watchers” and form their own “common sense” theories of behaviour. However, you may be surprised to learn how many self-appointed authorities and common sense beliefs are wrong... Because of the limitations of common sense, psychologists have a special respect for scientific observation (Coon, 2004, 9-10).

### Analysis

In these extracts, the texts distinguish between Psychology and common sense: it ‘frequently contradicts common-sense views’ (extract 1); the ‘view that psychology is mainly just common sense’ is one that ‘[e]very psychology teacher has to fight against’ (extract 2); and psychologists recognize the ‘limitations of common sense’ (extract 3). In making the distinction, common sense is presented as flawed: it is ‘obvious’ (extract 1); it ‘has never been a very good guide to scientific truth’ (extract 2); it has ‘limitations’ and many ‘common sense beliefs are wrong’ (extract 3). By distinguishing Psychology from common sense in this way, the texts are able to align Psychology with science in its superiority to common sense: it ‘frequently contradicts common-sense views’, which ‘scientific studies’ can be ‘denounced’ as (extract 1); it is not ‘just common sense’, which ‘has never been a very good guide to scientific truth’ (extract 2); and it is ‘because of the limitations of common sense’ that ‘psychologists have a special respect for scientific observation’ (extract 3).

### **Possible topics**

The definition of Psychology is, of course, an enormous theme that includes several related topics. For example, the scientific status of Psychology is itself a fundamental matter within CHIP. On the one hand, Psychology is invariably self-

defined as scientific. On the other hand, as philosophers of science have shown, there is no essential boundary between science and non-science: such a boundary has to be constructed. How, then, do Psychologists construct the scientific status of their discipline? This is also a question that can be answered directly through discourse analysis of psychological texts (e.g. Lamont, 2010). Previous student projects have explored how psychologists have constructed their discipline as scientific by debunking rival psychological knowledge (such as phrenology, psychoanalysis or parapsychology) as pseudo-scientific. They have also explored how these unorthodox areas of psychological knowledge have sought to define themselves as scientific.

The topic of scientificity can also be explored in relation to other conceptual and historical issues. Take for example, another key theme of CHIP: the role of history within Psychology. This typically involves making a distinction between 'old' and 'new' histories of Psychology, in which the former are described as celebratory and presentist. This topic can be explored as a project, by examining how histories of Psychology construct a particular version of the discipline. Celebratory histories of Psychology, of course, invariably define Psychology as a science. This, then, provides an opportunity to explore how the history of psychology has been used to construct Psychology as a science.

This was done in one student project, which for practical reasons also exploited the ubiquitous introductory textbook. After all, such textbooks typically include a brief history of the discipline that is an exemplar of celebratory presentism! Furthermore, these sections often serve as extended definitions of Psychology. However, they take a quite different form than the formal textbook definitions, in that they describe a particular version of the past as a means of constructing the scientific status of the present discipline. In this project, then, the research question was: How do textbook histories construct Psychology as scientific?

Having collected the data from appropriate sections in textbooks, the preliminary analysis identified several common themes, such as the description of the birth of Psychology, and the description of Psychology as having a long

history but a short past. In analyzing these themes, more specific questions were asked of the data. For example, in the case of the birth of Psychology: how is this event constructed as such?; what went before?; what changed? Or, in the case of Psychology having a long history but a short past: what is the difference between these two things?; what has been going on for a long time?, what is more recent? Asking such questions of the data helps focus the analysis more narrowly, in order to see more clearly how the themes themselves are constructed.

By then considering the function of such themes, in light of the main research question, it was seen how each contributed to a definition of the discipline as scientific. For example, Ebbinghaus' famous remark that Psychology has a long past, but only a short history, was sometimes cited in order to construct a classic narrative of progress:

'Psychology has a long past, but only a short history', wrote one of the first experimental psychologists, the German Hermann Ebbinghaus. By this he meant that scholars had long asked important questions about how people perceive reality, the nature of consciousness and the origins of madness – but they did not possess the means to answer them' [Gerrig et al, 2012, 8]

In this extract, the Ebbinghaus quote is explained ('By this he meant') in a way that constructs Psychology in a particular way. First, as in the extract above, it is presented as being concerned with the same questions that 'scholars had long asked'. This, of course, is by no means a self-evident point, since the questions asked by scientific psychologists are far from identical to those asked by earlier scholars. Nevertheless, the particular questions cited here ('about how people perceive reality, the nature of consciousness and the origins of madness') are readable as ones that have long been, and continue to be, 'important'. Second, Psychology is presented as providing the 'means to answer' these important questions, something that scholars previously 'did not possess'. Thus, the contrast between 'long history' and 'short past' is used to construct Psychology as being concerned with the same longstanding important questions, but superior in its ability to answer them.

More common, however, was a similar pattern, but one that did not include Ebbinghaus' remark. Here is another example of an analysis that employs the simple structure above, which is felt provides an analysis that better reflects the data.

#### Extract 4

although psychological issues had preoccupied the earliest thinkers as far back as the classical Greeks, psychology could not be considered a 'science' prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century because no systematic attempt had been made to pursue or generate the testable hypotheses that were necessary for a field of interest to become a science. Philosophers had pontificated about the nature of the mind but psychology was not yet a science to measure it (Schacter et al, 2011, 3).

#### Extract 5

humans have long been intrigued by their own behavior, and attempts to understand human functioning can be traced to early Greek philosophers. But until the last quarter of the nineteenth century this endeavor was pursued through speculation, intuition and generalisations made on the basis of an individual's experience. A major breakthrough occurred when the tools of science were applied to the study of humans, and psychology began to emerge as a distinct entity (Hewstone et al, 2005, 9).

#### Extract 6

In a sense, the history of psychology reaches back to ancient times when philosophers and religious leaders were asking questions about human nature and trying to explain human behavior ... when those looking for answers turned from relying on their own intuition and their own experiences to carefully collecting information through systematic observation and controlled experiments, they transformed themselves from philosophers into scientists (Papalia & Wendkos Olds, 1988, 6-7)

#### Analysis

The longstanding interest in such matters is stressed: they 'had preoccupied the earliest thinkers as far back as the classical Greeks' (extract 4); 'can be traced to early Greek philosophers' (extract 5); it 'reaches back to ancient times' (extract 6). This continuity is constructed by providing an object of study that can be read as both of interest to the ancients and still of interest to psychologists: 'psychological issues', 'the nature of the mind' (extract 4); 'behaviour', 'human functioning' (extract 5); 'human nature', 'human behavior' (extract 6). The claim that the 'earliest thinkers' were focusing on the same object as modern psychologists is, of course, far from self-evident. However, by constructing a continuous object of study, a comparison can be made in terms of how this has been studied. In making this comparison, prior attempts are presented as subjective: 'Philosophers had pontificated about' it (extract 4); it was 'pursued through speculation, intuition and generalisations made on the basis of an individual's experience' (extract 5); they relied 'on their own intuition and their own experiences' (extract 6). In contrast, the emergence of scientific Psychology is presented as progress: from a 'field of interest' to a 'science that could measure' rather than 'pontificate' (extract 4); 'a major breakthrough' (extract 5); 'from relying on their own intuition ... to carefully collecting information' (extract 6). Thus, in a similar way that Ebbinghaus made a contrast between Psychology's 'long history' and 'short past', these extracts construct a narrative of continuity in the object of study alongside one of progress in the method of enquiry. In doing so, they present Psychology as a scientific, and therefore superior, way of answering questions that have long troubled humanity.

An alternative kind of topic is that of changing understandings of mental illness. Over the centuries, we have defined madness in radically different ways. Many different classification systems have been produced, based on different assumptions, and providing the basis for different treatments. The frequency and extent of change over time is, of course, not only a challenge to the idea that any given description is accurate, but also carries direct implications for how individuals are treated at any given time. The most obvious and relevant text in this respect is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), which has not only changed in significant ways with each new edition, but has also had to make the

case (in each of these editions) that this particular set of descriptions is a sufficient basis for diagnosis and treatment. Given the explicit sense of ongoing change that any edition of the DSM represents, not to mention the obvious context of potential criticism in which it is published, this poses an interesting discursive problem with practical implications: how do the authors justify the most recent changes?

For example, the removal of homosexuality from the manual in 1973 followed well-publicized protests by gay rights activists, but was officially justified on the basis of scientific evidence (Bayer, 1987). Thus, one might examine how psychiatrists justified the change in scientific, rather than political, terms. On the other hand, discourse surrounding this, and many other, changes to the DSM have appeared in a wide range of media. The recent publication of DSM 5 was surrounded by controversy, online and in print. Discourse analysis of these texts could explore how particular understandings of madness are negotiated.

Other possible topics include the analysis of introductions to psychological articles. These typically involve some kind of historical narrative, one that presents past research in a particular way in order to warrant the research that follows. Alternatively, there are countless articles, letters and interviews in journals such as *The Psychologist*, which discuss and dispute all manner of conceptual and historical issues in Psychology. By analyzing in detail how this is done, students can gain insight into the complexity of such topics, and are able to consider both sides of any given dispute.

Such projects are excellent opportunities to encourage critical thinking. They demand a more critical reading of sources, and require that the student demonstrate the ability to construct a novel argument, to present that argument clearly, and to support it with evidence. Unlike more typical projects, however, which tend to be about teaching students how to do psychology, here students are required to think critically about the wider context in which psychological knowledge is produced, and the ways in which it is presented as authoritative. In

other words, it encourages the broader kind of critical thinking that makes CHIP so crucial to a psychological degree.

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